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ABSTRACT

Teachers of first-year college composition, particularly instructors and graduate teaching assistants with little or no teaching experience, are caught up in a debate concerning the appropriateness of social action as a facet of their personal pedagogical strategies. On the one hand, they are encouraged to promote social activism by individuals who claim that students need such training, that beginning college students have not examined the values of the dominant culture because they have been intellectually stifled by "lock-step" public school practices such as benchmarking and the "family values" curriculum reform proposed by some conservative school boards. On the other hand, they are assured (by some of these same individuals) that it is difficult to go too far in promoting social action, as students are intellectually mature enough to reject an instructor's promotion of a particular political agenda. Discussion of this issue abounds in professional journals and textbooks, such as the "Crossfire" reader, which directly engages students in either/or acts of cultural criticism and validates cultural criticism by implication. Social action as a teaching strategy merits further discussion. But classrooms must be de-centered in such a way as to give students the tools necessary for development and maintenance of critical consciousness, without robbing them of their unique perspectives. And classes must be grounded firmly in the act of writing, the discussion of writing, and the revision of writing. (Contains 19 references.) (Author/NKA)

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A Response to Arguments for Teaching Social Issues in the Freshman Composition Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Teachers of first-year college composition, particularly instructors and graduate teaching assistants with little or no teaching experience, are caught up in a debate concerning the appropriateness of social action as a facet of their personal pedagogical strategies. On the one hand, they are encouraged to promote social activism by individuals who claim that students need such training, that beginning college students have not examined the values of the dominant culture because they have been intellectually stifled by "lock-step" public school practices such as benchmarking and the "family values" curriculum reform proposed by some conservative school boards. On the other hand, they are assured (by some of these same individuals) that it is difficult to go too far in promoting social action, as students are intellectually mature enough to reject an instructor's promotion of a particular political agenda. This presentation examines current discussion of this issue, as it appears in our professional journals, textbooks, and personal interviews with graduate teaching assistants, and encourages further investigation into and discussion of social action as a strategy for teaching composition, as a springboard for student writing, and as an appropriate goal for college-level composition instructors.

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A Response to Arguments for Teaching Social Issues in the Freshman Composition Classroom

As a teacher of first-year college composition, I have been caught up in a debate concerning the appropriateness of social action as a facet of my personal pedagogical strategies. On the one hand, I am encouraged to promote social activism by individuals who claim that students need such training, that beginning college students are immature and have not examined the values of the dominant culture. On the other hand, I am assured (by some of these same individuals) that it is difficult to go too far in promoting social action, as students are intellectually mature enough to reject my promotion of a particular political agenda.

I believe that these two positions, while not always in a binary relationship, are fundamentally incompatible. Either students have not examined their own values, or they are mature; to say that a mature student has not examined his or her values is to claim that development of a values system is not a sign of maturity. Yet we accept this incongruity—engaging rationalizations which, if examined from the perspective of a historicist rather than an activist or theorist, break down completely.

What is the immediate outcome of this strange situation? We have, for example, a preponderance of published advice on how to teach students to be cultural critics. I began to think about this paper more than a year ago, after reading Ellen Cushman's "The Rhetorician as Agent of Social Change" in the February, 1996, issue of CCC. And, fortuitously, a year later CCC presented us with an "Interchange" between Cushman and Laurie Alkidas.

Cushman argues in favor of using the composition classroom to "empower people, establish networks of reciprocity with them, and create solidarity with them" (7). Central to Cushman's argument is the notion that effective composition teachers must be engaged in public discourse, that composition instructors ought to "increase our participation in public discourse" by bridging "the university and community through activism" (7).

Cushman's argument is powerful: "How can we study ideologies, hegemonies, power structures, and the effects of discursive practices when we overlook community discursive dispositions—the place where these language practices are first inculcated, generated and consequently reproduced in the social habitus?" (24). Politicizing composition—using the composition classroom as a "bully pulpit" from which teachers encourage students to take an active role in their communities—assists process writing, according to her argument.

In "Of What Does Skill in Writing Really Consist?," James Marshal attempts to place politicization of composition in a historical context. He argues that the strong political feelings of the founders of the process movement caused them to describe the movement in language which privileges teaching social action in the classroom (47). Specifically privileged, according to Marshal, are teaching strategies which point out a connection between politics and writing:

> . . . we have a privileging of reform over tradition, of progressive thinking over conservative thinking, of the spirit of opposition over the maintenance of power. Taken together these form a powerful argument for one particular way of seeing the world and against the other so that the process approach is seen as somehow "natural" while the product approach is, quite simply, false. (50)

Cushman's position seems to be an extension of the privileging Marshal outlines, an internalization of the good/bad, process/product argument. After 30 years, with the process writing movement's triumph over the product model in professional composition journals and at conferences, the argument has become an orthodoxy, unexamined and propagated widely. *Some* social change—change being determined by the instructor—is privileged over other change.

The February, 1997, *CCC* exchange between Alkidas and Cushman left me with a sense of validation. Like Alkidas, I, too, felt that Cushman's reciprocity networks were potemkin villages, behind which the students whom Cushman claimed to empower were actually disempowered. Alkidas writes: "Even in the name of empowerment, it seems interference rather than interaction to 'lend our power of status' rather than create it together" (106). What Cushman claims to be doing seems to be the opposite of what is actually happening—a sort of identity politics which empowers the instructor by allowing him or her to claim the oppression, the marginalization, which the instructor projects upon her or his students. Referring to this practice, Alkidas writes, "I cannot co-opt literacy struggles and marginalzied status to lend authority to my dissertation" (106). Neither can I—and neither can Cushman.

Lending authority (as Cushman does it) is like leasing your house—someone else has it, but you retain a great deal of control. Cushman's approach relies heavily on terms such as "language activity" (109) and "other types of literacy" (108), and there *are* such things as language activities and other literacies. There are also things such as biology, chemistry, and political science—all of which are legitimate

endeavors, and none of which is appropriate as the central focus of a *composition* class.

Cushman does not tell us, in her essay or in her response to Alkidas, how many papers and what kind of writing her students do. If she is truly interested in giving students such as Lucy a chance to succeed in our society, it seems to me that she should be interested in teaching her to write—not speak, or gesture, or paint—in the mode of our dominant culture.

When I read, in our journals or on my department's GTA email list-server, statements such as Donald McAndrew's in "Ecofeminism and the Teaching of Literacy," that "Our writing classes are perfect places to learn that 'love of nature emerges from knowledge of oppression and potential liberation within our eco-communities'" (367) I, like Alkidas, shudder. Something may be going on in these classrooms, but the teaching of writing has been forced into the background.

Frank Walters' either/or description of the present state of rhetoric and composition studies, in the November, 1995, issue of *College English*, makes me wonder if we're considering our students at all:

> In the universe of rhetoric, some forms (or some one form) of discourse will attain dominance and both define what is real and locate our place within the real. Our choices are few but radically contrastive: enter the fold of domination or wander its borders like wolves; adopt the epistemology implicit in its discursive formations, or devise resistant epistemologies that require different, resistant discourses; buy into the authority it bestows upon those who master its discursivity, or invent a new kind of mastery that challenges heretofore secure subject positions. (826)

For all our talk about de-centering classrooms, we attempt to control each other using the same binary, traditional thinking we claim to want to defeat. As Walters points out, in many of our discussions we refuse options which smack of pre-process approaches, because we have defined all attempts at direct use of our authority as "bad." In our attempt to further the causes we think are most worthy, we create a discourse which deliberately antagonizes those whose help we need.

My argument is not that worthy causes do not exist, but that we should not force our students to fight for our definition of the term. I find Stephen North's comments about hegemonic change particularly significant, here:

> . . .the catch is that it's very easy to simply replace one hegemony with another. That is, in order to create what it calls critical consciousness,

> the discourses of the Left may—for all I know, must—go beyond simply pointing out the interestedness of the discourses they oppose, to posit their own visionary privilege, their own insistent framing of what is "real". . . . In trying to suppress the discourses hegemonic potential, [we become] its victim. (134)

North seems to be saying that there is a difference between "resistance" and "resentment": when we insist that our students function within the hegemony we have created, we encourage them to feel cowed by that hegemony, and to refuse to cooperate with us. North writes:

> Such a discourse leaves little room for negotiation. If you're not part of the solution, as the slogan goes, you're part of the problem. These sharply differentiated poles, these insistent claims to visionary privilege, this framing of an agenda in such fundamental terms . . . make it a discourse that tends to be impossible to talk to; or one, at any rate, that never listens. It has an impressive terminological repertoire—notions like false consciousness, mystification, cooling out—with which to dismiss or denigrate all those other discourses of which my life is constituted. It seems unwilling to grant that any worthwhile hope or change, compassion or loyalty, any legitimate April hopes or August desires can spring from anywhere but itself. (135)

The same discourse that forces our students into marginalization squeezes us in a similar way. A symptom of the new hegemony North addresses is the ongoing discussion in NCTE's *Council Chronicle* and in our electronic discussion groups of the increasing lack of civility among composition professionals who meet to discuss theory and practice. In our graduate programs, as well, this clash of discourses illustrates the unwillingness of the new hegemony to hear voices from without. We have created, and operate within, a facile orthodoxy which is just as dogmatic, exclusive, and prescriptive as the so-called "formalist" product models which preceded it.

We feel the presence of this facile orthodoxy, this insistence upon what Jeff Smith calls "the ethic of direct enactment," insisting that we *always*, in every action we take as teachers of writing, work toward the admittedly admirable goal of making our classrooms "more caring or maternal or anti-hierarchical" (310). We feel it, and our students feel it.

We force our facile orthodoxy upon our students by continuing to use textbooks such as M. Tuman's *Crossfire* reader, which directly engages students in either/or acts of cultural criticism and validates cultural criticism by implication. If used with a limited rhetoric, or with no rhetoric at all, readers such as *Crossfire* compel teachers and students of writing to focus their attention upon issues instead of writing. The only justification for this that I can see is to argue that composition classrooms aren't about writing at all, but about pre-pre-pre-writing, about deciding who is orthodox enough to be allowed to proceed to upper-level, "real writing classes."

Let us return to the arguments which some of us use to rationalize teaching cultural criticism, and see what implications arise for composition scholars. The first argument is that students need to be taught, by composition teachers, to critically examine the culture in which they live. They need this, we are told, because students haven't gotten it at home or in public schools, both of these institutions being dedicated to forcing the young into traditionally-accepted societal molds. Further, according to this argument, the composition classroom is the single most appropriate site for this type of instruction, because almost all incoming freshmen are required to complete at least one composition course.

To deal with the second part of this argument first, I suggest we examine the implications of teaching social activism "because almost all incoming freshmen are required to take comp." Do we, as composition professionals, really want to make this statement to students, parents, and administrators? Do we really want to take on such an awesome responsibility, one not traditionally assigned us? I certainly do not want to be responsible for teaching my students everything which, from someone else's perspective, has been "left out" of an average student's experience in the academy. To accept such an argument is to give up our autonomy, to invite individuals from outside our profession—outside of composition, and even outside of the academy—to determine what we "ought" to teach. Composition becomes "medication," with individuals other than composition teachers writing "prescriptions" which they feel will "cure" students of the illness brought on by exposure to the dominant culture. This kind of control is, to my mind, Victorian: we think there can't be "too much of a good thing," so we force such strong medication upon our students that we poison them.

We fool no one, least of all our students, when we present a facile orthodoxy as our "real" goal. I'd like to share with you my experience teaching Freshman Composition, using the *Crossfire* reader I mentioned earlier. *Crossfire* was the

required text for EH101 at the University of Alabama, and as a first-year doctoral student in Rhetoric and Composition I pounced upon this material as an opportunity to encourage student writing by presenting material which would engage (and, often, enrage) students. We talked about the issues. We read about the issues. We wrote about the issues. I discovered that "resistance" was there, that my students were moved by the articles on topics such as the tomahawk chop and the appropriateness of distributing condoms to high school students.

Resistance, however, is not enough. At about mid-term, after my students had written and re-written three or four papers, we engaged the condom issue. I showed my students the accompanying segment of the *Crossfire* television program. Resistance was there; I could feel it, could hear my students discuss in small groups an issue about which they apparently felt very strongly. Then I asked my students, "What do *you* think is the *real* issue, here?"

"I feel controlled," said one student. "I'm tired of having other people tell me what to do and how to live."

Another student said, "It never stops. They told us what to do in high school, and now they're doing it in college. I'm able to make my own decisions."

These comments sparked a conversation about something I had not considered—my students *were* making connections between the text and themselves, and perceived that the adults debating a service to high school students were actually attempting to control *them*. And another thing: *I* was the *they* my students were talking about. Some resentment emerged from this conversation, a general feeling among my students that the *Crossfire* reader represented an attempt by me to indoctrinate them into "politically correct" discourse. From that resentment came the most interesting and well-written papers of the semester. The topics: ways in which popular culture is controlled by older people; situations in which individual students feel that control; and the university as a "bad parent." Certainly, those papers did not represent the work of students who had not examined the values of the dominant culture.

Why did the insight and inspiration I just mentioned not appear in my students earlier work? Certainly not because they were too immature to challenge me; I think they demonstrated great maturity, in waiting until they determined I was not the sort of instructor who would punish them for disagreeing. I suspect it was because I did not engage my students in discussion of what, for them, was the *real* issue, satisfying myself with presentation of issues which were "prescribed" by a textbook author who seemed more interested in his political agenda than in

teaching students how to improve their writing. Further, in presenting that agenda I gave it my tacit approval, and added to it the authority which adheres to my position within the university hierarchy.

Such hierarchies are always present, as much in a "de-centered" classroom as in a highly structured lecture format. We must accept the idea that we communicate our authority to our students, and lend that authority to events taking place outside our classrooms when we attempt to meddle in politics. Our authority is intrinsic to our function as teachers. Kenneth Burke writes:

> . . . to say that the hierarchic principle is indigenous to all well-rounded human thinking, is to state a very important fact about the rhetorical appeal of dialectical symmetry. And it reminds us, on hearing talk of equality, to ask ourselves, without so much as questioning the possibility that things might be otherwise: "Just how does the hierarchic principle work in this particular scheme of equality?" (141)

I find Smith's comments—in this month's issue of *College English*—an echo of Burke: ". . . even the most radical of us *are* the authority figures in our classrooms. We may disclaim that authority, but students know quite well who in the room has the power, ultimately, to set rules and requirements if she so chooses, and who doesn't" (305).

Furthermore, if students engage in resistance to the power differential we represent in the university hierarchy, we must think about whether we are actually teaching them to dissemble—*to lie*. At best, they may become silent and sullen—a silence which indicates passive dissent. At worst, they may dissemble completely, pretending to accept our calls to action. In other words, we may be doing ourselves (and the issues about which we feel strongly) more harm than good; if students resent our calls to social action—and many of them *do* resent this—yet expend emotional energy pretending to agree with us, that resentment adheres to the social action itself. We force our students into the very molds of marginalization we attempt to break.

This is, perhaps, the central issue. Many of us want to talk about marginalization because we feel marginalized; however, we assign our feelings to a third party, our students, and we do not solicit their feelings about what we do. We must disempower the antagonistic force of the discourse North mentions, and allow other voices and perspectives to be heard. This is not a tacit agreement with those voices or perspectives; we must learn to de-center our classrooms in such a way as to give our students the tools necessary for development and maintenance of critical

consciousness, without robbing them of their unique perspectives—perspectives we can glimpse but never really share. And we must ground our classes firmly in the act of writing, the discussion of writing, and the revision of writing.

Composition is an emerging field, a discipline in search of an historical framework. In human interactions it is not uncommon that, at the most chaotic moment, some individuals will call for a re-examination of the basic values inherent in that interaction. Such a call—a suggestion that we clearly define what Sara D'Eloia calls "the business of composition" (9)—is even more appropriate, and more easily done, in a field such as ours, a field without the firmly-entrenched mores of the traditional, established disciplines.

What, then, is the "business of English" composition? In the December, 1995, issue of CCC, Denise David, Barbara Gordon, and Rita Pollard outline three basic assumptions which they feel should govern writing classes: "(1) The development of writing ability and metacognitive awareness is the primary objective of a writing course"; "(2) The students' writing is the privileged text in a writing course"; and "(3) The subject of a writing course is writing" (525). Can we, as educators and theorists, accept these assumptions as the over-arching goals of composition? I can, and do.

As composition theorists and practitioners, we should truly de-center our classrooms, truly privilege student writing by focusing on that writing instead of the many activities which tempt us not to teach writing. The impulses, the temptations *not* to teach, will be better directed into our research, into developing *consistent* teaching philosophies which give our students the tools with which to make their own decisions. This is Alkidas' criticism of Cushman, the criticism I feel should be applied to the present fad of teaching social action instead of writing. Cushman describes a composition classroom which functions as a "company store," which lends authority but gives nothing away, which retains authority by disguising itself as the group which most needs authority—the oppressed, who, in academia, we commonly refer to as "students." Smith writes:

> There is a burden of proof on me as a teacher, a burden to show—by a preponderance of the evidence, at least, if not beyond a reasonable doubt—that what I'm offering will somehow help [my student], not just as a human being but as a college student with certain more or less clearly stated aims. . . . In my view, much of what is taught and advocated by today's compositionists is too far removed, its relationship to students' reasons for being in college too abstract. (313)

This is what happens when we, for example, choose to change our focus from composition, from writing and from writing about writing, to the more abstract goal, "literacy." Of course, I am not saying that the present interest in redefining literacy is inappropriate. It is, however, misplaced. To return to the "goals of writing classes" listed above, I want to reiterate: *the subject of a writing course is writing*. The site for change is the classroom, not the sidewalk.

Another important site for change exists: this conference. After a period in which the new paradigm, Smith's "ethics of immediacy," has controlled our discussions about why we do what we do, we have reached a site in the evolution of our field where we can draw back and examine our most basic goals. As composition professionals we must examine the relationship (which will never be equal) between "what we do" and "what we say we do." If we accept the notion of Composition as an emerging field, we must acknowledge that it is also an evolving field. North's call, his suggestion that we turn our critical consciousness inward, marks a turning point in our discipline. We have the opportunity to be "meta-pedagogical," to reject facile orthodoxy in favor of approaches which teach writing without insisting that our students accept our personal (or professional) ideologies.

Furthermore, we should recognize our own propensity for adhering to hierarchies, and should stop picking one another apart in our journals and at our conferences when we talk about something which does not involve the alleged importance of social action in the composition classroom. That "something," by the way, is writing. Our challenge, as composition evolves, and as we make choices which will determine whether or not our field continues to exist, is to examine our collective philosophy of education and figure out just how, and when, the focus of our composition classes ceased to be *writing*.

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